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WASHINGTON — The Central Intelligence Agency stated Wednesday that it has penetrated the Soviet government with a "number of well-placed" Russian spies.

Richard M. Helms, in his first public speech in five years as director of the CIA, cited the spies' key role in the 1962 Cuban missile crisis and implied that some of them are still operating in the Soviet Union.

By surfacing the statement at this time, Helms apparently sought to serve notice to the Kremlin that the United States has secret ways of checking on Soviet good faith in current negotiations on strategic weapons, the Middle East and other critical issues.

Speaking to the American Society of Newspaper Editors, Helms said the CIA was able to detect Russian missiles in Cuba in 1962 "thanks to U-2 photography of the Soviet Union and to a number of well-placed and courageous Russians" who provided crucial details on Soviet missile systems.

Refers to Penkovsky?

Helms was asked later if he was referring to Col. Oleg V. Penkovsky, the Soviet military intelligence official, who served as a double agent for both the CIA and British Intelligence. Helms replied that his remarks covered Penkovsky and "others."

Penkovsky was arrested Oct. 22, 1962, at the height of the Cuban missile crisis, and executed May 16, 1963. But the Soviet government has made no public mention of additional spies in the case.

Helms' speech thus left the implication wide open that agents remain in place inside

CIA director Richard Helms addresses annual convention of the American Society of Newspaper Editors in Washington. (AP)

the Soviet Union.

Helms obtained clearance from President Nixon before accepting the invitation to speak before the annual convention of ASNE.

Herbert G. Klein, the President's communications director, saw nothing unusual in the CIA making a public defense of its operations at this time.

Don't target on Americans

But Helms' speech created a considerable stir in view of the current clamor over Army and FBI "spying" on civilians. Helms went to great lengths to insist that the CIA has "no domestic security role."

"We do not target on American citizens," he said.

Helms acknowledged that the CIA collects "foreign intelligence in this country" by tapping university experts and interviewing persons who travel to Communist countries.

"The trouble," he lamented, "is that to those who insist on seeing us as a pernicious and pervasive secret government, our words 'interview' and 'hire' translate into suborn, subvert and seduce or something worse."

Calls charge vicious

He denied as "vicious" a charge that the CIA is involved in the world drug traffic.

Sen. George S. McGovern (D-S.D.) demanded Wednesday that the CIA and the State Department investigate allegations by Rapaport to prove that the CIA facilitates the movement of opium out of Southeast Asia.

Helms conceded, on the other hand:

"Our mission, in the eyes of many thoughtful Americans, may appear to be in conflict with some of the traditions and ideals of a free society . . . assertions that the Central Intelligence Agency is an 'invisible government, a law unto itself, engaged in provocative covert activities repugnant to a democratic society and subject to no controls

"It is difficult for me to agree with this view, but I respect it."